

INTERVIEWEE: CLIFFORD HENDERSON

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

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TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

Y: This is an interview with Clifford Henderson at his office on Highway 111 in Palm Desert, and today is Wednesday, December 19, 1979, and it's eleven fifteen in the morning. And I am Patricia Young interviewing Mr. Henderson.

H: Concerns . . .

Y: Palm Desert.

H: Palm Desert. Okay. It is my understanding that this interview concerns the *Post War* community of Palm Desert, which I had the pleasure of founding. My background actually is aviation rather than land development. However, the opportunity here appeared to be too wonderful. It was a dry, wonderful area, beautiful mountains and background and it was some twelve mile distance from Palm Springs. It had the convenience of city life, and

yet the aspect of desert and rural life. And to me it held potential and a wonderful place to live and retire. Subsequent to the founding, it has all come, proved to be true because so many fine, substantial and successful individuals, both men and women, have chosen Palm Desert and this area for there's full retirement or semi retirement. It may be of interest for you to know how I happened to come to the area in the first place. I've been a long-time, personal friend of Edgar Bergen, and he has a ranch close by. It was at Edgar Bergen's invitation that I came here for a weekend. And just the area itself with the fabulous mountains and the near distant offered an opportunity that was, that anyone with any ambition or imagination, they couldn't possibly fail to appreciate. Having decided to try and plan the community, the next task was to secure the purchase, some thirteen or fourteen parcels of land of varied acreage. It was all *continuous* because it was to be a total community. It was on 111, the important boulevard. It still was, as I said previously, only twelve miles from Palm Springs. If you knew that in due time it would be all the conveniences of home life, such as shops and stores and automobile and service stations and all, but

even at the beginning it was only a distance of twelve miles to Palm Springs to find all those personal conveniences and luxuries. The total acreage . . . ^{Evelyn} Evan, you've heard me quote the total number of acreage many times.

I want this to be accurate.

Y: Don't worry about it. I'm more interested at this point in your impressions, then we can come back and I'll get all those details again.

H: Yes. Well, I had no personal background in community planning. However, I very readily found the few essentials near the boulevards, the possibility of even a railroad, and a nearby adjacent community which did supply all the needs of life such as markets, even doctors, and all with the convenience of a small community only a few miles distance. And with that, I proceeded to acquire seventeen different parcels. The acreage, that will be filled in later. ^{During} three or four months when this land was being quietly acquired from individuals, I went forward with community planning and acquired the services of Tommy Thompson, a nationally known land planning engineer, because I was in the ^{opinion} certain definite rules or different policies had to be adhered to. The streets and sidewalks

and all the things that, it couldn't be hit and miss, it had to be legitimate so that it would eventually be acceptable, if and when the community was incorporated, as an incorporated community. The initial plan did include fine boulevards, railroads and adequate land for two or three parks, playgrounds, anticipating a full life for all members of a family for the potential community. This has come to pass. This includes a golf course, several tennis courts and of course some land was given for a grammar school which is now been in operation several years. The high school is an immediate prospect midway between Palm Springs and Indio. It's only a matter of five or six miles and we are providing the land for the projected high school. The matter of the population will dictate how soon the school district will be justified in raising the bonds including the construction of the high school. We already have grammar schools through eighth grades. Another element which is quite different from the average subdivision is planned a beautiful, another elegant, plush family community, the famous Shadow Mountain Club. Rather than where they show pictures of the projected club, the construction of this beautiful club was activated immediately with a huge

figure eight swimming pool. Folks put in a golf course, beautiful clubhouse, I believe six tennis courts. Now these were described in the real estate brochures, but there was also the brochures with actual pictures of these facilities which were not really dreams and something hopefully promised for the future, but had actually been built to be enjoyed by even the first few families to buy a home or occupy a residence and living in this new Palm Desert community. This has all come to pass now. The Shadow Mountain Club has proved to be very, very successful, providing a wonderful social life for families. It's very high class, but it's not, the facilities and meals and all are not priced beyond the reach of the average family. So there's Shadow Mountain Club which is functioning today, and has been enjoyed including the tennis courts and even the nine-hole golf course. It's functioning today in keeping with the promises which were incorporated in the original brochure. And for this I take considerable pride. But so many of real estate projects, they show glamour pictures of what's to come, but in many instances, it never does. The developer, the promoter, of that community never follows through and provides the things which were pictured in

the literature is a real estate comer in the sale of the lots, in the original sales campaign. Maybe you have some questions you want to ask me.

Y: What were the early Shadow Mountain Club days like? I know when we had the Christmas party where Barbara *Keedy* moved in, it sounded fascinating and very family oriented.

H: Well, Shadow Mountain Club was conceived and built as a family club, and it was actually built many years, or many months, ahead of the population in the area. Many of my friends, *believed I went mad when I* made that kind of an investment. Well, I had, fortunately, been able to accumulate some funds from the sale of some real estate in another area. I had some cash available. It was not necessary to go out and make any exaggerated promises to the bank or anyone else in hopes of getting financing. I had the initial financing to build the original Shadow Mountain Club, but in the individual design anticipated enlargement. Of course, the huge swimming pool is still adequate beyond the present need. It became quite famous, that tremendous figure eight swimming pool. But that was that, plus the beautiful clubhouse which, by the way, was more than adequate in its original structure. But again has been enlarged once or twice and its design permits

further expansion of the clubhouse proper. This is all coming true in conformity with the ambitions and hopes, and even the promises in the original real estate brochures for Palm Desert. I have much to be thankful for to have enjoyed my continued reasonably good health, to enjoy tennis on the tennis courts and enjoy the social life in the clubhouse and to see so many families, even with very small children, they grow up and the children are now actually playing tennis. And this whole new generation, they must take over Shadow Mountain Club in the next five or ten years, but to them Shadow Mountain was a part of their life from the time they were a baby or a little child. So they're not going to be impressed with this big clubhouse. They're going to accept it as a way of life. And that was the plan, that was the hope for them. So I've had some very fine successful men. I'll say this, I never went out to any rich widows or any individuals who couldn't afford, I'm talking about the initial investment which was several hundred thousand, I went to successful individuals who I happened to have contact, who had the project failed, it would not have determined total financial ruin for them. Quite happily, none of that came to pass. The project has been financially

successful, and the original investors are now receiving a fine return on the speculative investment which was admittedly a rather tremendous, very big reckless gamble initially. It was, maybe they had too much faith in me personally, but if my health continued, I was determined to see Shadow Mountain Club bloom and prove to be first a social success and a recreational success, and finally a financial success for the fine men, and a few women, who provided the initial capital to build this beautiful club.

Y: What about Fire Cliff Lodge? What that built around here?

H: Yes. That was right by the way by my original investors was Leonard Firestone, one of the Firestone Tire Company family, and it helped get things underway. Leonard and I built the first lodge in the community. It was called the Fire Cliff Lodge, which was a reasonable success. The Fire Cliff Lodge is still in the community to this day. Several others have come along and the community now is, you know, it's beyond the pioneering stages. We think, I must make a point of this, Palm Springs is at the very foot of the famous mountains way out twelve miles. So we get about an hour and a half more sun because the sun goes down over the mountain to the west.

And this may have been someone's opinion ^{to} make enough to *feel comfortable* but we did make enough to make a big point. I saw them once, an hour's more sun, lots more fun. We did get at least an hour and a half's more sun before the sun went over the mountain and become a shadow. And that became a plus and did influence many people to build here and join the club rather than any area immediately at the foot of the mountains in Palm Springs. That will always be true; we're always going to have that hour and a half more sun, which when you come here, will pretty much get that sun on a vacation or for your good health. It will ever be a plus for Palm Desert over any other area lying immediately at the foot of the Santa Rosa Mountains. I don't know what else I could say. I'll admit I've been in love with Palm Desert from the time I first saw this land and was able to acquire some seventeen parcels, which put together constituted a projected new community town site and which has today become a rather successful community involving many, many fine, wholesome families.

Y: How about a little bit more in terms of how you foresaw the Fire Cliff Lodge being used and what's happened to it over the years? I know it's not now what it used to

be in terms of there are more buildings.

H: Yes.

Y: What was it used for?

H: Well, they had to be, you just can't sell real estate to the public without doing something to prove that your statements, you believe in them yourself, and you'll back them up with personal investment. Leonard Firestone of the Firestone family is a long-time personal friend, but he electioned to go along with me in financing the first lodge, and we selected the name of Fire Cliff Lodge. It's a combination there of the name Firestone and Clifford Henderson. And it was the first lodge with a main dining room structure, lobby, and some twelve bungalows of three rooms each. They could either be occupied singly or separately because each room had its own bathroom with a toilet. But we again had the shuffleboard and a small paddle tennis court. We, of course, everything at Palm Desert was close to the big Shadow Mountain Club, and the big tennis courts. And of course, the Shadow Mountain Club did provide dining room and a social life for the community at least ten months of each year. The population of the community today and how the facilities and life at the Shadow Mountain

Club and one or two other smaller clubs, they so accepted as commonplace that's is kind of something new to even refer that there was a time when they were so very new and they were strictly the pioneer projects, pioneer facilities, which backed up, which were built to support the lots which were then being offered for sale. Of course, a lot of vacant lots. But I'm just one of the many who's so grateful it all has proven to be successful. It has justified the financial investment of the original investors as well as those that come along and bought one or two lots and maybe built a house later. We still have that advantage of being about an hour and a half more sun every day because we're twelve miles from the foot of the mountains. And the future of Palm Desert is . . . these advantages, structural and physical advantages, will remain constant always. Therefore, I think it will forever be a preferred community for anyone electing either a vacation or to retire. Or have at least a seasonal home in this desert area. Of course, we enjoy a wonderful dry climate, wonderful sunshine most every day in the area, and so many things that give health, provide wholesome life and health to so many thousands of people.

Y: You not only needed the mayor, but the Chamber of Commerce as well. That's wonderful!

H: Yes, I did, they still have a plaque. I was so called honorary mayor. It was later that we did have incorporated, and now we elect our mayor.

Y: You were saying that Shadow Mountain Club is only opened for ten months. I assume that there were two summer months when it was closed.

H: Yes, when the valley, of course, you know in July and August, the valley was almost deserted except a few caretakers. Some people now have found that it's very good for their personal health that they need this dry climate. Just more and more people stay here through July and August. Furthermore, air conditioning has become a big factor, you know. If you want to stay indoors, you can get any temperature you want. So July and August isn't a blackout anymore. It's greatly, you know, people can afford it, they go to the sea or the mountains or the seashore. They just by custom and they like the change. That's the time of year when they make a change if they can afford to divide up their year some. *Just to* get away the total time. June, July and August.

Y: So things more or less close down here for a couple of

summer months.

H: They do. They're pretty . . . but, funny, when the sun goes down, it goes to life with night. We've had a lot of beautiful evenings. I've been here a lot, July and August now. I don't think in terms of, my plans do not include maybe going in town for a week at the coast. But I don't have any, from year to year, don't make any plans. Well, I'm going to maybe do something to get out of this place for July and August. I just don't think in those terms. What else can I tell you?

Y: Well, I'm glad to know a little about El Paseo. I was told that was sort of a bit of your wife's dream that it would be the kind of *AVENUE* that it's turned out to be.

H: Well, that's true as far as the name. I picked up El Paseo in my travels to Europe. The name was, in fact I named all the streets in the town, but El Paseo, I'm trying to think just exactly, in eastern Europe, in other words, of course, there's a number of El Paseos around the world, so there's nothing new about that. But it's the quality street wherever it's used it seems to attract a better class of merchant development. So we tabbed this El Paseo. It's going to be paralleling the highway. And, of course, it was a wider street, driving down the

middle and you know, it's developed pretty much in conformity with the original plan. I mean, I'd like to see it all built up solid with quite successful shops, but they couldn't all make a living, as you know. The shops there are doing very well, though. There's been very, very few failures, but they haven't tried to over-expand, you know. And furthermore they're priced sensibly. *We've been not* having ^{to} fighting people with the prices. That's a good policy. Had they done so, you see, we'll just wait until we get to the coast or someplace else to do our shopping. So I'm glad to see the merchants do as well as they have. There have been very, very few failures. I maybe could count two or three on my fingers of failures. Two of the leased shops never had any experience in it, in the shop, and it wasn't as simple as it seemed to be. So when people would come and buy whatever they had in the shop, well, they didn't have the experience to buy the proper merchandise. So they just hung on the racks. You know that.

Y: Yes. But there must have been a time when El Paseo was pretty blank.

H: Was for several years. It certainly was. But we didn't let any junk go in there. We held out, it's going to remain

it was a wide avenue with an island in the middle. And it's going to be the avenue, no matter how long it takes. And as time goes, it's going to be more nice. It is pretty much the avenue today, it really is.

Y: Who was the first merchant to actually start business on El Paseo?

H: Oh, gosh, I'm going to have to . . .

Y: Or where was it, more or less down near Portola or . . .

H: Yes.

Y: The other end.

H: Near Portola. When you get over there, your memory sure does let you down.

Y: Even when you're young. Don't worry about that.

H: I'm going to have to . . .

Y: Well, I'll come back and ask you about that.

H: Yes. I'm going to have to think about it a bit, and ask a couple of people. I'll get those things for you.

Y: Good. Also, when you opened up the lots, the initial lots . . .

H: Yes.

Y: Parcels. Did you hold an affair, sort of like Judge McCullum held back in the, you know, the . . .

H: Oh, we put on a big ballyhoo, you know, when we opened

the lots, you bet. We had a big ad in the big Palm Springs paper.

Y: That's okay. You can leave that. No problem.

H: All right. And we had quite a beautiful brochure, you know, the real estate. No, we were convinced we were going to have a community with church and school and, by the time, in the meantime, we gave the land to the school, and I think the church, in fact, the first church, and they sold that property, it's up 74, and with that money bought the land of the present community church. But we were going to have a church and school and all the things that, it was going to be a real community. And the beautiful Shadow Mountain Club, very few communities still don't have even today. They don't have a community center. You know, did you ever hear mentioned Art and Dottie Todd?

Y: No.

H: Well, this ^{trio} ~~trail~~, they've got a bass player. She played the piano and he played the banjo and guitar and they harmonized. They were sensational, and then they brought out a bass player. I mean, I remember that he'd change that once or twice during the years, but Art and Dottie, it was tremendous for a little ^{trio} ~~trail~~, tremendous music.

And people came from miles around, and they were together for years and years. And I think they're in Honolulu now. They're still . . . brought them back a couple of times. They had an Art and Dottie evening *and* people came from all around here to have an evening with Art and Dottie Todd. They were working in Long Beach or somewhere else. You'd only get them maybe, I don't know, Monday night or some other night. Couldn't get them for the weekend. But to get the *group* out, Art, and it was just like a big homecoming night, and they played until two o'clock in the morning because they're harmonizer, but they're nice people, lovely couple. With very tremendous talent, both on their instruments as well as their vocal. "Shots on the Moor," that was their theme song. (chuckle) I don't think I even remember that, but that record was, they were doing that record, loads of them were sold. Because they were famous for "*Chanson d'amour*" "~~Shots~~ A La Mode".

Y: Oh, they actually made the record of it.

H: Oh, yes.

Y: Oh!

H: Sure.

Y: Now were they playing up at the Shadow Mountain Club?

H: Oh, they were there for several years at the Shadow Mountain Club, sure. It was during that time they made the record. That was their song that made them famous, and they didn't even have it recorded for about the second or third year, I guess. But a lot of the members bought their record.

Y: That's great. When you first came out here, what was Palm Village like? I assume that was a going concern.

H: It was a bankrupt subdivision. Somebody subdivided it. It's one or two houses, and that was it. It was abandoned. Oh, somebody still had title to it, but anyway, it was a total failure. They didn't provide any land for any, there was no clubhouse or any of that because it was just some vacant lots with about two houses built, and there was a little gas station, and that was it. And, of course, as Palm Desert, we didn't try to draw any line of demarkation. Palm Desert began to succeed and was successful. Property, there was lots over there that was very, very cheap, liquidated and so on. So there was some growth over there, too. And they also could join Shadow Mountain Club. The initiation fee was very nominal. So there was no tempt to point their fingers, well, you live in rent Palm Village. It was never pointed

out as something that was supposed to be second-class, but people originally, they wanted to be on Shadow Mountain Club on the Palm Desert side and wanted to be over the Shadow Mountain Club. That was, our lots were still, when prices were cheapest, liquidation lots over there, but being close to Shadow Mountain Club and all, and the golf course, you gave an advantage to anyone that could afford maybe a better lot. There was no serious battle or competition. If they wanted to buy something very, very cheap, they went and bought something in Palm Village. But the houses that were built over there were kind of, you know, scrawny, second-class. We had very strict architectural control. They'd submit their plans. There was a committee, and they looked over these plans. It's true today. Some architectural control. They can't build just a shanty or a shack of some kind.

Y: Were there stables that were built at the same time?

H: Yes. No, if, I've had some horseback accidents, horses and stables are off by themselves, but we encouraged, my older brother who had an office in Santa Monica, he sold a few lots. And he was a very devout horseman. He liked to ride, so he brought his horse down here and got

one or two others to get a horse. And they finally got six or eight horses. They had a ride maybe somewhere around the desert once or twice a month. It was a nice activity, but one of the pictures I've taken, it was . . . I'm trying to think of, you don't know the name of the preacher . . .

Y: Dean Miller?

H: What?

Y: Dean Miller?

H: Oh, no, no. The original preacher.

Y: I can't remember his name. I've seen it.

H: Anyway, we, of course, we had wonderful church services on Sunday. We had a big thing at Easter and all the children had their Easter egg and all that. But this Easter affair was always quite a popular time to be in the desert was at Eastertime. We had an egg hunting and egg rolling outfit and all. We made, well, we'd, you know, it was all the promotion in town. You had to be doing something to keep your interest in real estate alive.

Y: What kind of people first moved here? You talked about families and you talked about people who were coming here until the part of the year. What was the general . . .

H: Well, some of those were somebody ~~who~~^{whose} health, either a man or the wife, you know, doctor says you should spend some time in a dry climate. And that was a common thing. Anyone that had any lung trouble, it was a good, healthy place to live. So many people had the means, had a second home here, and they spent it. And maybe the man would go, might be a lawyer or business in town, the wife would be here all seven or eight months, and he'd come down every weekend. It wasn't so far to drive out. It was a hundred and eighteen miles out of Los Angeles. It was not too far to drive. Less than two hours' drive actually. So we had many families that lived here, but the man went into town most of the week. And most every week, that was the life style. This really was their home.

Y: Does that still go on today?

H: Yes, I think it is. I think it is.

Y: What were your impressions when you first came out here, when Edgar Bergen told you about coming here.

H: When what?

Y: What did you feel when you first saw Palm Desert?

H: Well, you see, I'd been a long-time friend of Edgar Bergen's. And he came down here, you know, for a reason. He came

every week. This climate took care of his health situation greatly. Of course, he was, you know, he was never pushy. But, you know, on evenings every night at the club and Edgar still enjoyed, and he had a couple of others. Maybe, of course, Mortimer was his principle dummy, but there was a girl, too. I forget her name. But he had that talent. We were old friends. He never got tired of, we wouldn't put it in the bulletin, but we just knew if Edgar was down he'd be on sometime during the evening. And he might even try out something that he was, you know, a routine that he was on his paid, it was a good place to try out a couple things to see what the public reaction was. Edgar was a big plus because he also had some money in the development corporation.

Edgar's gone now. He died too young. He died too young.

Y: Did people come to the club every night, then was it just a place where everyone congregated every day?

H: Yes. If they went up and didn't have anyplace to go, they'd come and maybe we had some *smorgasbord* dinners. Even come and play bridge, you know. It was the only really real place to go whether or not they came up to eat was not a condition. Dinner was there and very modestly priced, and they could even get a sandwich. It

was not a problem. We, of course, had a bar there, too. They might go up and at least go up there to buy a drink if that's what they wanted. They would drink two or three. The bar always had some business. The club always paid its way with a small profit.

Y: Was the club around when you held these, you said you had a great deal of ballyhooing when you opened these parcels for sale? Was the club around then?

H: Oh, yes. The club was built very early. Very early, and of course, every time you opened a new unit you'd make a big ballyhoo, a big night of it at the club, and try and have two or three lots committed to somebody. Well, you know, I'll take (chuckle) it was kind of corny showmanship, I guess, but we'd have a couple of bell cows.

We had equipment. We'd give a map with these. Is that one open? Yes, it's open. Well, I'll take that one. (chuckle) There was maybe someone there that was a rascal, but it was all in the game. Everybody that was buying those lots at least doubled their money when they sold it. There was no one had to lose what they put in because a lot of it was just a down payment. And some people, you know, their circumstances change, and they merely abandon, you know, after they've made two

or three payments and couldn't make any more payments, why they'd eventually lost their equity. That would be legitimate and all.

Y: Now was one of the people you originally purchased the property from a man named Wilson? Was it his ranch, off of 74?

H: Raymond Wilson had owned a parcel. He was a bit of a problem. He went along and agreed to put his lots the same price as ours. No, he never would sell. He kind of held out, and this thing, Palm Desert, was very good to him. I mean, it made him a lot of money, but he never put any money in and he didn't contribute. He just put a big price for his own lots, and that's the extent of his participation. His lots were in demand because they were right down El Paseo. He either got it as a homestead or for practically nothing, you know. So he made a good retirement out of Palm Desert without any investment. We never had any quarrel. I mean,

Y: Who owned most of the property then when you originally *bought it*

H: Several different, I picked up about I think about a total of eighteen many small parcels. And it was still very cheap because someone earlier had some kind of a campaign

that sold, you know, three acres and five acres here and so on and so forth. And then nothing happened. And they got tired. A lot of them had been foreclosed. They'd got tired paying it, you know. And there was no demand. And my job, I collected enough of these to get them all together. It took some doing to, and send some money to get these all together in one total.

Y: So there's been some attempt to have some kind of residential area here previous?

H: Oh, yes. It was a total of two houses, I think.

Y: On this side of 111?

H: No, I don't think, they were on the other side of the highway. Don't think, that old house, I think it's still on 74, it's been rebuilt a bit, original homestead houses still there. Just up, kind of been worked over. I drove by there the other day and the house was still there.

Y: Where is it?

H: I can drive and show it to you.

Y: That would be good. I would like to see and get some photographs of it.

H: Yes.

Y: Whose old house was it?

H: Whoever did the original homestead.

Y: And they owned all the property on the other side of
111?

H: Yes. We bought all the land except the one plot where,
I think we bought, had no idea we were going to try and
do a town, and bought it very cheap, you know, just as
acreage.

Y: Yes.

H: And went along. He found what we were doing and found
us selling his second lots. He never was very bitter,
but he never was very unhappy because he realized he'd
had the chance to do the same thing, but did nothing.
I can drive by and show you his house.

Y: Good. I would like that. Maybe next time I come we can
do that.

H: All right. Easy enough.

Y: Good.

H: Someone stuccoed the sign outside quite recently. The
house is still there, though. You'll see it's very
different. It's just up from the road
up 74, just . . .

Y: By the Iron Gate Restaurant?

H: Just above the real estate office there, yes. By I think
a couple of big trees beside it. Stands there all by

itself.

Y: I'll be darned. I guess one just kind of misses it
when you don't know what you're looking for.

H: Yes. I'll take you down there now if you want to do it.

Y: Let's see, I have to be in Palm Springs by one. Yes,
we can do it now.

H: Okay.